

Halo: Staff of Loki

by TheGamesGuy

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Summary: In the year 2525, a UNSC ship, the Staff of Loki, responds to insurrectionist activity on a distant colony. A young marine will soon learn the galaxy is far more dangerous than anyone originally thought.

1. Chapter 1

[I did my best to describe the Covenant through the eyes of someone who has never encountered them before. I might add more chapters if people want me to, I have a few ideas of were to take the story.]

I awoke to the annoying buzzer of an alarm clock reading 8:30am. Reaching over with one hand I hit the "off" button. As I stared blankly at the UNSC seal printed underneath the bunk above me, I sighed when I realized I had been dreaming of Harvest, my home planet. The United Nations Space Command was formed as an interplanetary defense force designed to protect humanity. Not that there was much to protect against, aside from ourselves. During my last deployment on Watchman, the most dangerous thing was a poisonous moss. It only took four stupid teenagers to figure that out. Other than that, there was the insurrection, a terrorist movement bent on colonial independence from earth.

As I climbed out of bed, I looked at the other set of bunks on the opposite side of the room to see one of my roommates still asleep. "Lucky bastard," I said under my breath. Jase didn't have anything to do until 4:30, when we all had to run drills. I was going to be stuck in the armory for the next three hours cleaning equipment. I pulled on a dark green marine jumpsuit labeled with my name, Solomon Bradshaw, and then left the cabin. The four of us had been sharing that same tiny space for three months now. Cramped quarters can make you hate your best friend, so I enjoyed leaving whenever I got the chance.

As I continued down the hall, I passed by one of the many windows on

the ship. Although the view of space was obstructed by the spaceport we were docked at, I looked out anyway, hoping to catch a few glimpses of new ships that had arrived overnight. _Stalingrad, Seoul, In Amber Clad, Iroquois_—no new arrivals. The _Staff of Loki_ was a Marathon class heavy cruiser, the largest class in the UNSC fleet. Armed with two MAC cannons which used rows of electro-magnets to propel projectiles at near-light speed, it also carried several hundred missile pods and forty point-defense turrets.

"Hey, Solomon!" a voice called from behind me. I turned around to see one of my other squad mates, Abioye Chikunga, running towards me with a data pad in his hands. Abioye, a huge brute of a man, shook the floor as he got closer. Abioye was born on Kholo, a large planet settled by Kenya. "Check it out!" he shouted in excitement, showing me the data pad. I looked to see a picture of an African woman holding a newborn baby. Outside the window behind her, I could see the distinct skyline of New Alexandria. "Congratulations!" I exclaimed "Boy or girl?"

"Boy!" he said excitedly. "I can't wait to meet him." Abioye was in a situation shared by far too many servicemen. He had just finished his three weeks planet-side leave, only to have his child born six days later. It would be another year until he got a chance to see his son, if he stayed lucky.

"You can tell me more later. I need to get going," I said as I started back down the hall.

"Sure thing, man. See you at lunch!" he shouted in reply before rushing down the hall, presumably to show Jase. I kept a brisk pace as I moved to the armory. The last thing I wanted was to be late. Gunnery Sergeant Angelini was not a man to be crossed. Once, during a live ammo field exercise, he gave me orders to hold position, but a tree was blocking my view. When, I moved ten meters to the right, he had me flogged for insubordination.

As I walked into the armory deck, most of the other members of my unit were already there cleaning their equipment. I opened my locker and pulled my gear out: body armor, helmet, equipment pouches, a backpack, and night vision goggles. Everything one needed for any situation was included; the UNSC spared no expense. All of our gear was painted a dark green color to camouflage us, with the exception of our shiny metallic black weapons. Our body armor consisted of a chest plate, a helmet, shin guards and, shoulder pads. I knew that cleaning our gear meant we would soon ship out somewhere, probably to some outlying colony to deal with insurrectionists, or maybe even to the planet Reach, the UNSC's main base. As I began dusting off my armor, my third squad-mate, Zhenya, sat down next to me. Zhenya looked like your stereotypical marine, average height, large muscles, buzz-cut, tattoos covering his arms.

"Think they're sending us to Reach?" he asked in his thick Russian accent

"Nah. Probably Harmony," I replied. "I heard insurrectionist activity is on the rise out there."

"They wouldn't have sent Spartans along if we were going to Harmony. That's in the center of space."

My heart skipped a beat "Spartans? When did we get Spartans?" I asked surprised, although part of me didn't believe it.

"They just arrived this morning," Zhenya said, looking at me as he cleaned his rifle. "There were two of them, really tall. Heck, the girl was bigger than Abioye!"

"If the Navy sent Spartans then something big must be going on," I replied, still trying to hide my disbelief.

Now I started to get worried. The Spartan program was designed to create the perfect soldier. I remembered hearing the old reports about the Spartan-I's Project Orion. Several soldiers and marines had volunteered to take part in a new type of warfare program. Using new training methods and the latest breakthroughs in biochemical developments, the soldiers were physically augmented to make them faster and stronger. Of course eventually the Spartan-II program was initiated. No one knew where these people came from, and rumors had suggested that they derived from children kidnapped by the Office of Naval Intelligence or, possibly, robots. Either way, these new super-soldiers were highly capable fighters. The average Spartan-II stood at 7'3" and had incredible strength. They knew, and had mastered, every detail of warfare, immune to pain, shock, and PTSD. They really were "The ultimate soldiers."

"Not to mention they only gave us a six-hour warning before we depart, and we got a direct communication from Admiral Cole," Zhenya said, his gaze returning to his rifle.

"How do you know all this?" I asked curiously.

"I was on guard duty in the CIC, so I heard a few things," he replied in an annoyed tone.

This ended our conversation. When I had finished cleaning my gear, I stowed it back into my locker. We had about an hour to kill before lunch, so Zhenya and I headed up two levels to the Rec room. We had lost some money playing billiards the night before, so we turned on the TV and watched the news. No real stories there, just a homicide here, a new scientific breakthrough there, etc., until a story came up about insurrectionist activity on some colony.

"You ever wonder if, say, we were faced with a never-ending horde of innies, how long just the two of us could hold out?" Zhenya asked as he watched the newscaster reporting a bombing at a navy yard.

Zhenya and I were a sniper team: I fired the gun, while he called out targets and made the calculations. On one mission we had killed twenty-seven insurrectionists, and how many could we have killed if they hadn't retreated?

"Well, it depends on the situation," I said. "I mean if they were in open ground, we could hit dozens of them, but only until our ammo ran out"

"Okay, say we had unlimited ammunition in a five story building surrounded by open ground. You have your sniper rifle, I have my DMR," He replied

"I'd say we could kill sixty at least," I said after thinking for a

moment. "I mean, once they get inside, we're screwed."

We continued to watch the news for another half hour before heading down to the mess hall. We were served grilled Moa, a bird native to planet Reach, and mashed potatoes. The food was fresh, most likely brought aboard today. I sat down with the rest of my squad and checked my watch, two hours to cast off.

"Hey, Sandra!" Jase yelled to the cook. "Something is different today. It looks like you put in more food and less ass!"

"Yeah, yeah, just shut up and eat it!" The cook yelled back.

Jase was just a rookie. This was his first deployment, so he didn't know what a good meal meant. Usually before a dangerous mission, the navy would give us the best food they had. After all, a WWII tradition states that if you're going to send someone to die, you can at least give him a good meal first.

I looked over to see the two Spartans Zhenya had mentioned, a man and a woman both fully clad in MJOLNIR armor, but not wearing their helmets. The woman stood at least seven feet tall with a scar on the right side of her face, and she wore olive green armor. She was extremely muscular, and I spied short red hair underneath a red beret. The curves that normally characterized the female figure were lost in her muscle mass and the bulk of her armor. If they had worn helmets the only way to tell them apart aside from armor color, was the guy was even bulkier. A few inches taller, and with slightly more muscle, he had a short black Mohawk and wore dark blue armor. "Damn! Look at those badasses!" Abioye said, looking over my shoulder towards the Spartans.

"Good thing they're on our side," Zhenya as he, too, looked up to watch them. The four of us stared at them, watching them waiting in line for food. They glanced over toward us a few times but didn't seem to care. They received two trays of food each, with four times the portions we had gotten, and both sat down at separate tables alone. They just ate their food and left as soon as they'd finished.

"Well, there they go," said Kimiko, another of my squad mates "Where do you suppose they're going?"

"Most likely to cryo-sleep," Jase answered. Cryo-sleep was used during prolonged periods of space travel, holding non-essential personnel in suspended animation to conserve resources. After lunch, we all went back to our cabins and waited there, for regulations prohibited personnel from being in the halls while a ship was leaving port. After about an hour we heard the PA click on "UNSC _Staff of Loki,_ this is _Sigma__ Station_ control. You are cleared to depart."

"Copy that, Control," Fenris said. "All hands brace for cast off!"

Fenris was our ship's artificial intelligence unit. He operated the electronic systems and piloted the ship when needed. His holographic avatar resembled a Viking warrior with a cloak made from a wolf pelt. We all held onto the closest thing to us. For me, the bed post. The vessel shook for a few seconds before steadying out.

"All hands are now cleared to move about the ship," Fenris said a few seconds later, before he waved goodbye and his hologram de-materialized. I quickly got up and started for the door.

"Where are you going in such a hurry? We were just about to get the playing cards out," Zhenya asked, puzzled.

"I'm going to talk to Hans, to see if he knows anything about where we're going," I replied.

"All right. Hurry back, or we'll start playing without you," he said, as he reached for a deck of cards sitting on his footlocker.

"I'll make it quick, Zhen," I promised as I walked out the door.

Hansel Jaeger and I had met in middle school and remained friends all through high school and college, before going our separate ways in the military. Despite both of us joining the Marines, he had been selected for advanced training and became an Orbital Drop Shock Trooper or ODST. As fate would have it, we ended up on the same ship together. Most importantly, a warrant officer, higher than I on the superiority ladder, he might know something we didn't.

I tried his cabin first, but he wasn't there. I left and began making my way to the weight room two levels down, passing several sailors who seemed to be in a hurry. On the way I saw one of the Spartans walking down the hall towards me. He didn't say a word, just walked right past me, but I noticed on his shoulder pad was a name plate that read, Travis-114. I wondered if they even had real names. I walked into the weight room to find Hans on a bench press. Hans was six feet tall with an almost bear-like frame, and even by marine standards he was very muscular. He had short blonde hair in a crew-cut, with blue eyes that added the only splash of color to his pale face. Hans had been born on Emerald Cove, a planet with low light levels, but he had moved to Harvest when he was thirteen years old. When he looked over and saw me, he set the weights down and stood up. I gave a salute as I walked closer.

"Hey, man, what's up?" he asked. Even though he surpassed me in rank, we were still friends, so he didn't mind if I got too informal when speaking to him.

"I was wondering if you knew anything about where we're going," I replied, as I leaned against a nearby rowing machine.

"All I know is the ship is heading to Refuge, but I can't tell you why."

This frustrated me. "Refuge is a just a small mining planet with only six hundred colonists. Why are we going there?" I asked, obviously sounding a bit angry.

"Look, I can't tell you. I don't even know the whole reason either. Everything is on a need-to-know basis." He held up his hands.

"Chances are the bridge or Sgt. Angelini will tell you when we get closer."

I sighed. "Well, thanks anyway, sir." I saluted before walking back

out. As soon as I crossed the bulkhead and into the hall, a voice came on over the announcements and told everyone that we were headed to Refuge. My trip to see Hans now appeared pointless, but then the captain ordered all unessential personnel to report to their assigned cryo-pods. This was it. We were preparing to jump to Refuge. The alarm sounded, and I ran to the cryo-deck, to find my squad already there.

"Everyone in, now! Go! Go! Go!" yelled Sgt. Angelini our squad leader. He stood atop a crate ordering us to our pods. A short stocky man with olive skin, Angelini spoke with an Italian accent that had made him the laughing stock of the base where he first served. Once promoted to sergeant, however, he soon earned a brutal reputation. When we were all safely inside our pods, Angelini climbed into his own pod. A doctor came to each pod and gave us an injection of cytoprethaline, a drug designed to stop ice crystals from forming in our blood stream.

"Fenris, close pods in room 2-32b," the doctor said.

The hatches slowly began to close, shutting us all into pitch black cocoons. I could start to feel cold as the hissing of the cryogenic gas now releasing filled my ears. I took a deep breath in and felt the chill spread through my chest, as I lost feeling in my limbs. By the time I realized my eyes were closed they already felt too heavy to open. The last thing I heard before succumbing to the cold was Fenris' voice saying, "All active personnel brace for slip-space jump."

Slipstream space, or slip-space for short, was a set of seven dimensions existing in a small bundle. By moving matter from the three "normal" space dimensions to Slipstream space, through use of a Shaw-Fujikawa slip-space drive, one could change the laws of physics for a piece of matter or, in this case, a ship. When the drive activated, it moved the ship into slip space, a region not governed by the laws of physics, and the ship could turn a two-hundred-year voyage by normal means into one of just about a week. Almost all ships had a slip-space drive, as it was essential for practical interstellar travel.

In what seemed like seconds later, I awoke to the buzzing alarm of the pods opening. We all climbed out, some people throwing up or coughing as a side effect of the drugs. The PA clicked on, telling all squads in 2nd company to arm up and assemble in the hangar. We had reached Refuge. All of us in 2nd company assembled into our squads and ran to the armory. We were twelve in all, including me and Sgt. Angelini. Opening our lockers, we began strapping on armor plating and filling our pouches with ammunition before grabbing our weapons. I used an SRS99 sniper rifle. Although heavy and bulky, a single shot at 2000 yards could still penetrate fifteen feet of flesh and bone, making it a formidable weapon at long range.

We all assembled in the hangar as Pelican-class drop ships and Longsword-class fighters, being prepped by navy men, lined the edges of the hangar. Through the force field, we could see Refuge, a huge greyish green marble, with patches of blue dotting the surface. We lined up in rows of twelve. Each squad had its own row, with the commanding officer on the leftmost side. My squad wound up pretty far to the back. We saw a warthog jeep drive by and park in front of all of us. In the passenger seat sat Captain Donovan Mitchell. A very fit

man for his age, the 54-year old Captain Mitchell captained the _Staff of Loki._ He climbed on top of the warthog's roll-cage and stood up.

"Let's see a show of hands," he began. "How many of us are, or know someone who is from Earth?" He raised his hand and looked around. Out of the seventy-two of us, only one other hand up. "Okay, so not that many of us. The insurrectionists say that the people of one planet owe nothing to the people of another planet! The insurrectionists say that Earth is in the past, and the past is dead! Well, not so long ago all of humanity lived on a single planet! Hard to imagine, isn't it? But try to think of what it must've been like to be a human back then, to know only one world. Each one of you contributes to a unified Earth government. But how is that fair? Why should I give anything to Earth if I don't even live there? Without us, without the UNSC, colonies starve, planets die, and for what? The insurrectionists say they would rather risk the lives of millions of colonists than do their duty to the trillions of humans spread out across this galaxy! But not me. Me? I say we are all in this together. Now get down there, and show those terrorists what real humans look like!"

2. Chapter 2

The captain climbed back into the passenger seat, and the warthog drove off. The flight officer signaled everyone to board the Pelican drop ships. Each squad boarded one at a time, and I sat between Zhenya and Abioye, with Jase sitting across from Abioye. We felt the ship lift up slowly as the rear door shut, sealing us inside as gaudy red lighting clicked on in the troop bay, which many marines morbidly referred to as "the blood tray." We sat silently through most of the trip to the planet surface, until about halfway there the pilot began listening into his headset for a moment and then spoke. "I hate that guy."

"Travis gave you a compliment, so you hate him?" Fenris queried as his avatar appeared on the console, his arms crossed and a smirk across his face.

"Spartans are trouble. I don't like having him here, call me paranoid."

"You always expect the worst," Sgt. Angelini chimed in

"Bad feelings are an occupational hazard. We don't go anywhere unless there's a good reason." he replied before listening into his headset again. Turning around, he gave Sgt. Angelini a curt nod.

"All right, everyone!" Angelini shouted. "Nearly a week ago, the colony world of Refuge went dark, no communications in or out. We suspect the innies are behind it. They have been trying to cut the UNSC supply lines for years. When we get down there, our first priority is to look for survivors, got it?"

"Sir, yes sir!" we shouted in unison. As the ship touched down, we readied our gear.

"Bravo squad sweep the south side of the mining facility!" Captain Mitchell ordered. The ramp dropped, and we stepped out, keeping our

weapons at the ready. When the LZ was secure, Angelini ordered Zhenya and me to the top of a mining derrick to get a good vantage point. We quickly climbed up the ladder and set up our equipment. Both of us lay prone on the platform. I readied my sniper rifle. Extending the bipod and resting it on the ground, I looked through the scope to check my sight lines. I got a good view of Refuge. A deep gray silt covered the landscape, with the occasional boulder and massive fungal formations on the horizon.

"You in position?" Abioye's voice crackled on the radio.

"Yes, we are," Zhenya replied. For nearly an hour we watched, keeping an eye on the settlement, the chirping of local wildlife the only thing that broke the silence. "Hey! Over there!" Zhenya said rapidly as he looked through his binoculars. I pointed my rifle toward where he was looking and saw a door opening seemingly by itself on a small supply shed.

"It's probably nothing. You're just jumpy, Zhen," I said accusingly.

"No, no," he said quickly. "I saw the knob turn!" He asked over the radio if anyone was near the shed, and he got a negative reply.

"It might be one of the missing colonists," Sgt. Angelini said back. "I'll send someone over." We watched quietly, while I kept my rifle trained on the doorway. Then we saw our squad-mate, Kimiko, as she walked slowly around the shed towards the door. She crept up and shined her flashlight inside then turned around and gave a thumbs-down to us, signifying that there was no one inside.

"See, Zhen?" I said, giving him a slight nudge. A flash of light appeared behind her and a glowing two-pronged blade-like shape appeared, light blue, which looked like two icicles side by side. Lighting arced between the points. "What the hell?" I said out loud. Kimiko turned around, and the blade shot forward, impaling her through the chest, the spikes sticking out her back. The blade jerked away, causing her to crumple to the ground. Zhenya and I watched in horror as the blades wielder appeared. The blade was in the hands of a tall creature, towering at least eight feet tall, with red metallic armor plates covering its body with and a dark gray, thick rubber-like material underneath. Its hands appeared to have two fingers with opposable thumbs on both sides of the hand. Its feet had two large toes, and its jaw was composed of four hinged mandibles lined with teeth. Its small metallic blue eyes seemed to fix on Zhenya and me.

"What the hell is that thing?" Zhenya said, panicked. The creature's mandibles opened, and it appeared to roar at us before disappearing again. Suddenly there was a huge explosion at the northern end of the settlement, but it wasn't a normal explosion. The fire appeared a light blue with mixes of purple. The radio was overwhelmed with sounds of screaming and gunfire. A large purple insect-like vehicle materialized in front of us. It hovered just twenty feet away. A large door opened on the side and we saw more of the creatures that had killed Kimiko, four in all. Three wore red armor, but the other had gold plating and a large ornate headpiece. Mixed among them were smaller creatures around five feet tall with mottled gray skin and large triangular metal backpacks with hoses connecting to masks over their faces. The creatures made several unintelligible noises before

raising their weapons. Bolts of blue light arced over our heads as they began firing. Zhenya fired with his own rifle. The bullets tore into the smaller creatures, leaving jagged holes in their armor as light blue blood flowed out of the wounds. The bullets had no effect on the larger creatures. Instead, a blanket of blue lightning seemed to cover them with each impact.

Zhenya and I panicked, and we ran to the ladder and slid down as quickly as we could. The ship began taking shots at us from a small turret on the underside. Pink balls of energy slammed into the ground and left burning craters in its wake. We took cover in a small drainage ditch, and more of the creatures came at us on foot. I fired my sniper rifle. The heavy rounds tore into the small creatures, leaving massive holes in their small bodies. "Look out! It's one of those split-jaws!" Zhenya said, referencing the hinged mandibles. He took several shots at it, but its shield protected it. I fired a shot that hit the split-jaw, causing the shield to flash before fizzling away. The split-jaw growled at us and came charging toward us. I took a second shot and hit it square in the chest. Deep-purple blood stained the ground as the split-jaw fell. This split-jaw must've been a leader or something, because when it fell, the shorter creatures began running away making panicked high-pitched sounds. One of Zhenya's bullets had hit one of the small creatures' gas tanks, causing a violent release of green gas, and sending the creatures limp body flying through the air. A large cloud of this gas made its way towards us during the fight. Believing it to be toxic, Zhenya and I fumbled for our HAZMAT masks, but one whiff of the air, and the stench was unmistakable. It was only methane.

"What the hell? Do they breathe this stuff?" I said as I took my hands off the mask canister. Angelini's voice crackled on the radio, ordering everyone to fall back to the LZ. Zhenya reloaded his weapon, and we were about to move when a streak of purple shot through the air. Zhenya screamed in pain and fell to the ground. I dragged him back into the ditch and was relieved to find him still breathing. Sticking out of his calf was a long, sharp, pink, crystal-like object. I pulled out a small field dressing kit. Zhenya winced in pain as I pulled the crystal out and wrapped a compression bandage around his leg. A second bolt of purple shot over my head, embedding a similar pink crystal into the dirt followed by a third that hit a rock which broke into hundreds of pink shards. I raised my rifle and peered through the scope where the bolt had come from. I saw a new creature standing in a tree, not like the others from before. This one looked smaller, with a nimble frame. Its head reminded me of a velociraptor from old books about dinosaurs, and it had feathers on its head that ran down its spine. Its three-digit hands held a long bluish purple rifle-like weapon that had pink spines covering the receiver. I fired a shot at it, but the creature quickly leapt out of the way. I took a second shot, but it blocked it with some kind of round shield that materialized from a device on its wrist. A third shot hit the shield, changing it from a blue color to a bright red; a fourth shot caused the shield to dissolve, as a puff of bright-purple blood flew from the creatures head. It made a squawking sound similar to a bird as it fell off the branch.

I carried Zhenya back towards the LZ where the Pelican was waiting, when we saw several small black shapes come streaking across the sky, ODSs. Likely when things went sour, the captain had ordered the ODSs to drop in and secure the situation. The black seed-shaped pods slammed into the ground, the doors opened shortly after, and a single

ODST emerged from each pod. The ODST's armor was somewhat similar in design to our marine armor, except for a few extra bits of plating and a coat of black paint. Their helmets differed as well, resembling 21st-century motorcycle helmets with a white visor. Printed on their shoulder pads were the infamous med-ref stickers, each sticker with a name, blood type, and a list of medicinal allergies, only given out for particularly dangerous missions. We called them "death markers." I caught a glimpse of Hans leaving his pod, and I could tell it was him, as he was the only one who had AB+ blood. He looked at me for a second before continuing on his way.

We could see the Pelican now waiting for us. Its engines were hot and the boarding ramp down. "C'mon, get in!" Angelini yelled as he stood on the boarding ramp with his shotgun at the ready. A small glowing blue ball landed in front of Zhenya and me, which preceded to explode in a blue flash knocking us both back. Before I could stand up on my own, I felt a hand grab me by the collar of my torso armor. Now held a foot off the ground by one of the Spartans, I tried to see its face, but a chromed orange visor concealed it. I looked at the name plate: it was Travis. Travis held me in one hand and Zhenya in the other and carried us all the way to the Pelican with relative ease.

The Pelican began to lift off when a creature bigger than any other we had seen came out from between two buildings. It was massive, 13 feet tall, with thick bluish white metal armor with four long spikes at the shoulders. Although it didn't seem to have any hands, one arm had a massive metal shield attached to it, while the other had a huge cannon with a glowing green magazine. Between the gaps in the armor, its body appeared to have no skin, like it had been flayed, so I could see muscle-like structures underneath. It raised its cannon towards us and made a low groaning noise that was more "felt" than heard. It fired its cannon, and a huge green glob of material flew towards us. The pilot jerked the ship to the left, so the shot missed us, but it still melted a massive hole into a nearby mining vehicle. A marine readied a rocket launcher and fired a shot towards the thing. The creature exploded, sending bits of armor plating and orange goo flying. A two-foot-long worm landed on the boarding ramp, along with some goo and bits of armor. It squirmed in pain before Angelini fired a shotgun shell into it, causing it to bleed luminescent orange blood.

The ramp shut, and the ship began flying back to the Staff of Loki. I looked around to see half the seats were now empty. Only six of us had made it out: Zhenya and I, Sgt. Angelini, Jase, Travis, and some marine from a different squad. "What the hell were those things?" Jase asked, breaking the silence. We looked around at each other, hoping someone would have an answer. We began talking about the things we had seen and managed to come up with names for them. It turned out that the other marine and Zhenya both had the name "split-jaw" in mind, while the smaller ones with the masks we called "grunts," because they appeared to make up the majority of the creatures. The velociraptor thing I christened as a tree-turkey, based on the sound it had made when I killed it. Then we got to the big 13-foot thing.

"It was made of worms," Travis said in a monotonous voice. "I killed another one. The things are big cans o'worms." This got a short laugh out of us, breaking the tense atmosphere, but Travis didn't say anything.

When the Pelican landed, medical staff were at the ready in the hangar with stretchers and medical gear. The medics must have expected more of us based on the number of stretchers. Five of us could walk out on our own, but Zhenya needed medical attention for his leg. The doctors put him on a stretcher and carted him away to the infirmary. The flight officer walked up to Angelini. "Sergeant, do you mind telling me what the hell happened down there?" he said in a gruff voice.

"Do I look like Lieutenant Dornan?" Angelini answered. "Ask him what happened."

"Dornan didn't make it. You lot are the only ones who made it back. The captain wants to talk to you, so don't go far." We all sat down on some crates sitting in the hangar and stayed silent while we waited for Captain Mitchell. A second Pelican flew in, but only the ODSs and the female Spartan climbed out. Hans carried a wounded man who had severe burns across his chest, and many others had scuffed armor, some even missing bits of armor plating. The ODSs didn't seem to have fared well against the creatures either, and they, too, were told to wait in the hangar. I began to wonder what the creatures were. Could they be local life forms? Impossible! Their technology was too advanced. We would have found them sooner. I started thinking of old science fiction movies and began to wonder if they were alien invaders.

While we sat waiting, Hans came walking over to our group. "I take it none of you know what those things are?" We shook our heads silently. "Well, whatever the hell they are, their weapons are damned effective. Our armor didn't do anything against this thing." He reached behind his back and pulled a small A-shaped object. The cross appeared to be a grip of some kind, because Hans held it by that. Deep purple with a dark blue point, the weapon had pink-crystalline spines adorning the top. "I managed to pick this up from one of the dead guys. These spikes on top get sucked in and then fired out towards an enemy." Zhenya's injury must've been caused by one of those weapons, as the pink crystals were unmistakable. "Of course that's not all we saw," Hans continued. "There were other things that shot blue bolts of energy that went straight through our armor and some weird glowing-sword thing." We all began sharing our experiences of what we had seen. A few little details differed, but the whole big picture was the same. These creatures' weapons were energy based, which made their equipment far superior to our own. They seemed to be fond of the colors purple, blue, and red, as these appeared on all of their vehicles and the majority of their equipment, rather than the more practical dark green camouflage we had. The split-jaws appeared to have some type of force field that covered them, but the field would shut off after multiple weapon impacts, and they must also have had an invisibility ability or device. The tree-turkeys were definitely some form of marksmen, as they were observed to engage at distance. The giant can o'worms was likely a form of heavy infantry.

Captain Mitchell arrived with an officer from the Office of Naval Intelligence, ONI for short. "I understand you people encountered something on the planet surface. Would you care to go into detail?" he asked. Meanwhile, the ONI officer prepared to take notes on a data pad. We told him of everything we had seen: the split-jaws, the tree-turkeys, everything.

When we had finished, the Captain looked on silently and pulled out a cigar. "I'll let you take it from here," he said to the ONI officer as he lit his cigar and walked away. The officer, wearing a standard white-and-grey naval uniform, had his insignia signifying his rank-Major. His name tag read "R. Taylor."

"What if I told you that you aren't the first to encounter these aliens?" he said, peering at us from behind his thick glasses. We looked at him puzzled, "What you just described is an alien alliance group known as the Covenant Empire, a conglomeration of various alien species. In fact, you only encountered four of the eight races that make up the Covenant."

"Say, isn't covenant a biblical thing?" an ODST asked.

"Well, yes," replied the officer. "The Covenant races follow a religion that worships the long-extinct forerunner race." From what I knew, the forerunners were an old race from long ago. No one quite what had happened to them, only that they had left a few ruins scattered on planets. Ruins had been found on a handful of colonies, but nothing other than small buildings and structures. "The Covenant were first encountered less than a year ago on Harvest. We believe they seek the forerunner ruins dotting the planet surface. Apparently they believe our excavations in the area are heretical. They seem to have a thing for reverse-engineering forerunner equipment, as their weapons and equipment are more advanced than our own. For instance, we use bullets, but they use plasma. Anyway, since then, there have been multiple skirmishes across the planet between us and the Covenant, but they have all been kept classified. Just like this event, understood?" We nodded silently. I began to think of my family back on Harvest. I had seen the Covenant kill nearly 72 trained marines in less than an hour. What would happen if they launched a full invasion? I looked out the hangar towards Refuge and thought of the marines we had left down there, about Abioye and the son who would now never meet him.

Between the Staff of Loki and Refuge, a massive dark-purple object materialized out of thin air. It was shaped like a stretched oval, but bulging in the center, with a horizontal ring lining the outside that conformed to the object's shape, attached to it by several struts and lined with light blue lights. Alarms went off, and Fenris began calling for general quarters, battle stations. Several bolts of plasma fired from this new ship slammed into the Staff of Loki. Emergency lights began to flash, as boarding sirens rang. We already had equipment, so we ran through the halls toward the airlocks. Carts loaded with ammunition, supplies, and wounded sailors rolled past as we sprinted to our assigned stations. The ship jerked, knocking several men to the ground as a second barrage of plasma struck the ship. The captain called for evacuation of sector 4b, as we took positions at the airlock.

Titanium-steel barricades had been set up by marines already in position, joined there by several unessential sailors armed with only service pistols or whatever they had found in the armory. We heard the clicking sound of the automatic turrets as they began picking off the incoming boarding craft, followed by the metallic crashing sound of the magnetic accelerator cannons as they fired at the Covenant ships. A loud clang resonated through the corridor: the Covenant had boarded! Purple plasma began cutting through the airlock. We all held

our breath and prepared to fire. A hole opened and was kicked inward toward us, and we saw a split-jaw and several tree-turkeys standing at the ready, and they began firing. Blue bolts of plasma and pink needles flew through the air as we returned fire. The tree-turkeys used wrist-mounted shields that deflected our weapon fire; the split-jaws resisted with their force fields. I fired a shot towards the edge of a tree-turkeys shield, causing it to flinch and drop its guard. A second shot found its way into its head. A flurry of pink needles came flying at us, I took cover as they struck the barricade and shattered into shards. The blue energy bolts however, cut clean through the barricades, killing the marines attempting to take cover. Our armor could do nothing against the Covenant weapons either, as shots tore into anyone they hit, killing the men almost instantly.

"Fall back!" Sgt. Angelini shouted. "Light 'em up!" We unclipped grenades from our bandoliers and hurled them into the Covenant. Both tree-turkey and split-jaw alike, blasted to pieces by the cluster of explosions. We ran back to the second choke point where a second set of barricades was manned by another group of marines. We made it to safety, except for two guys cut down by plasma fire as they ran. We continued firing at the Covenant soldiers, now joined by grunts. I managed to kill several grunts and a split-jaw before a sudden flurry of bullets killed the remaining forces.

We looked back to see the female Spartan standing with a heavy machine gun in her hands, a tripod-mounted weapon that typically needed two men to carry. I finally got to check her name plate, Karen-094. "Get ready. More are coming," she said in an almost robotic monotone. We reloaded and stocked up on ammo from supply crates as we prepared for the second wave. A flurry of plasma came flying down the hall as the Covenant rounded the corner. Several plasma bolts struck Karen, but an electric blanket covered her body similar to the split-jaw's force field, and arguably more effectively, as her machine gun sliced through the split-jaw's shields, while their shots had little to no effect on her. It didn't take long for the Covenant to retreat after that, but we could tell it wasn't the end. The point-defense turrets had stopped firing, but the alarm remained active, because the Covenant had destroyed or deactivated the turrets. A swarm of grunts came running at us with their arms outstretched, carrying in each hand a glowing blue ball of energy. We fired, bringing scores of them to the ground, but one made it too close and proceeded to clap its hands together.

A massive plasma explosion filled the corridor, torching a dozen marines on contact. Flung back, with her armor covered in plasma burns, Karen managed to get up as more Covenant flooded the hall. There were only ten of us left, so we ran to the third cordon outside the bridge. There we found no more than five marines supported by ten ODSs and a couple of sailors. We prepared ourselves for the Covenant when the bridge door opened and a security officer ordered us in. We ran in to see two dozen other marines and ODSs already inside. The air lock door shut behind us, leaving no one to guard against the Covenant.

The Captain looked back at us for a second before turning his attention back to the mangled mass of steel and cable that had once been a computer. Fenris stood atop a miraculously intact holo-projector. "Fenris, open all airlocks except for this one and any other areas with crew still alive."

"Affirmative, sir," Fenris said, giving a nod. "There are now no Covenant forces left aboard."

"Sir, the Covenant ships are re-targeting their weapons on us!" shouted a panicked sailor at the controls of a badly mangled computer.

"Fenris, get us the hell out of here!" Captain Mitchell demanded as he stood up in his captain's chair.

"Sir, a random jump could kill us!" Fenris shouted back. Random slip-space jumps were nearly always fatal. Without calculating the correct coordinates, one's ship could run into a planet, a star, a space station, etc.

"They could kill us!" the captain shot back angrily, pounding one hand on Fenris' projector and pointing towards the Covenant ships with the other. "Make the jump!"

"Very well, sir," Fenris said. The slip-space portal opened, a massive black orb in space absent of stars, radiating a band of fluctuating white light. The ship lurched forward as the engines fired up and moved towards the portal. A wave of plasma rounds slammed into the side of the ship, causing controls to overload and catch fire. Sailors grabbed fire extinguishers and began fighting the flames as the captain ordered full throttle, and alarms started to flash indicating that the reactor was stressed.

"Just a bit more! Keep going! just a bit more!" the captain shouted, the Staff of Loki made it in, and the entire view screen was now black with a map of the galaxy displayed. The random coordinates put us at the very fringe of one of the Milky Way's spiral arms. We all breathed a sigh of relief. We had just escaped the Covenant.

End
file.